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Horseshoe Bay hooks Texas golf writers

By Bob West
The Port Arthur News

For Texans looking closer to home for a memorable golf vacation, in light of rising travel costs, Horseshoe Bay is about as good as it gets anywhere. The Hill Country oasis less than an hour west of Austin on Hwy. 71 is in the midst of ongoing upgrades, and pretty much blew away members of the Texas Golf Writers Association at our annual summer retreat.

Over the years, the TGWA gathering has been held at Lone Star gems like the Four Seasons at Los Colinas in Irving, Austin's Barton Creek, San Antonio's LaCantera, Stonebriar in Frisco and The Woodlands. Having been a regular attendee for over a quarter century, I can't recall a buzz quite like the one generated at Horseshoe Bay 10 days ago.

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From the resort's three terrific golf courses — Slick Rock, Ram Rock and Apple Rock, replete with their jaw-dropping vistas and smooth, quick greens — to its 18 hole Bermuda grass putting course known as Whitewater, to the boat trip on constant level Lake LBJ, to stellar accommodations and food fit for a king, there was only one downer. Nobody wanted to leave.

Horseshoe Bay, of course, has been around since the early 1970s, when noted architect Robert Trent Jones Jr. carved out Slick Rock as a real estate lure. With the real estate business booming, Jones was ultimately brought back to design the other two courses. Ram Rock opened in 1981 and Apple Rock in 1986.

Jones was properly proud of his efforts at Horseshoe Bay, which led to recognition by Golf Magazine as one of America's Best Golf Resorts.

"I know of no area that has a more interesting variety of golf than Horseshoe Bay," Jones was quoted as saying. "I rank this among the best in the world."

By 2005, Horseshoe Bay was on such a roll full-time residents of the 7,000 acre paradise voted to incorporate into a Class A city. Not long after, a commitment was made to give all three golf courses a facelift and to spruce up other resort facilities. The bottom line is impressive, and a good thing is about to get better, with a fourth championship course designed by Jack Nicklaus — Summit Rock — in the works.

The common denominator for all the Horseshoe Bay golf courses is serious elevation change that translates into spectacular views for miles and miles. The tradeoff for the golfer is few flat lies. Holes run up and down and around desert-like plateaus, offering stunning looks at Lake LBJ, several waterfalls and a steady parade of deer crossing the fairways.

Slick Rock, with a slope of 131 and a rating of 72.8, is by far the easiest of

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the three golf courses and is home to the resort's most unforgettable feature. The 14th hole, aka the "Million Dollar Hole," offers a winding cart path that takes golfers on a ride through a waterfall that spans more than 35 yards and dumps more than 8,000 gallons of water into Slick Rock Creek each minute.

The other end of the difficulty spectrum is Ram Rock, the course on which the TGWA championship was contested. Ram Rock, dubbed "The Challenger," is brutal, with a slope of 137 and a rating of 75.6. From the back tee distance of 6,999 yards, it would be well nigh unplayable for anybody who doesn't carry a single digit handicap.

Among the obstacles are 62 bunkers, most of them deep, 10 water hazards, six dry creeks and an island hole of 212 yards from the championship tees. Ram Rock received a 4 1/2 star rating on a 5-star scale in Golf Digest's 2006 ratings.

Fortunately, our championship was contested from the regular tees. Only one player, former professional Curt Sampson, was able to break 80. My 81, which included nines of 45-36 and an 8 on a par 5, was good for second.

Apple Rock, meanwhile, is probably the most breathtaking of the three courses. It plays to a slope of 136, with a rating of 75.4. Elevation changes are the most severe on Apple Rock, which plays down to the shores of Lake LBJ and features a tough par 3 over a finger of the lake.

The scenery on Apple Rock is such that former Texas A&M coach Dennis Franchione built a home overlooking one of its holes. Another retired football coach, Spike Dykes, has a home on Ram Rock.

While golf was the hook for members of the TGWA, Horseshoe Bay offers much more for a family vacation. Four swimming pools, watercraft and boat rentals at the lake, tennis courts and spa facilities are all part of the overall experience.

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